

Project Smoothes Way for People with Disabilities on Ice

When people at Alpha One say there's room for everyone on the ice, they mean EVERYONE. As Maine's largest organization run by and for people with disabilities, Alpha One knows that individuals of all ages who have physical and mental disabilities can fully enjoy ice sports and recreational ice skating if they are given the opportunity.

Through its project called Rink Link, Alpha One is proving that many types of ice sports can be open to people who have varying levels of ability. Hockey, curling, figure skating and broomball can all be adapted for people with disabilities.

Although interest in ice sports is growing rapidly, people with disabilities are often left out. One in five Americans has a disability – that's 20 million people – and they want to participate in all the activities that their able-bodied peers enjoy. The keys are access to facilities, the availability of adaptive ice sports equipment, and increased awareness of ice sports activities.

Ice Arenas and ADA

“One of our major goals is to show ice rinks how they can benefit from complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act,” says Wes Smith, an Independent Living Specialist at Alpha One, a center for independent living in Maine. “Many ice rinks, especially older rinks, don't have the ramps, doors and accessible rest rooms that people with disabilities need.”

Rink Link, a grant program from the Department of Education available through Alpha One, promotes adaptive ice sports for adults and children with all types of disabilities. Rink Link provides information on the ADA and tax incentives for accessibility. Rink Link can also provide tips to figure skating coaches or hockey teams on how to adapt their training for people with disabilities. Rink Link assists ice arenas in setting up programs such as skating partners for people who are blind.

Thanks to Rink Link, Family Ice in Falmouth, Maine, has offered free skating time to a sled hockey team. Rink Link, in partnership with Northeast Passage of New Hampshire, sponsors sled hockey demonstrations in northern New England. Rink Link also offers information about community activities such as hockey teams for children and young adults with developmental disabilities organized by Maine Adaptive Sports and Recreation.

Specialized Equipment

“Ice sleds and other adaptive equipment open up a world of possibilities for children and adults with disabilities,” says Smith. Rink Link is working with the manufacturers of sleds, sticks and skates to increase the availability of specialized equipment. For only \$500, an ice arena can have a sled on hand for use by people with disabilities. Smith recommends an ice sled with a handle so that a person with a disability can be pushed or pulled, if necessary.

Increasing Awareness

Marketing is an essential step to getting people with disabilities involved in ice sports. To reach out to people with disabilities, ice arenas can contact organizations such as Independent Living Centers like Alpha One. Other organizations, such as the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Muscular Dystrophy Society, state Developmental Disabilities Council, Association for Retarded Citizens, rehabilitation hospitals and centers, and special education directors in local schools, can help ice arenas to connect with people with disabilities. Ice arenas can also contact groups already participating in wheelchair

basketball or other accessible sports to spark interest in ice skating.

Newsletters or websites that serve people with disabilities welcome information on recreational activities. Smith suggests that advertising by ice arenas should note that they welcome people with disabilities.

“People with disabilities are a significant group of potential customers,” says Smith. “Reaching out to people with disabilities has economic as well as social benefits.”

Rink Link encourages ice arenas to include people with disabilities on their boards of directors or to have an advisory board of people with disabilities, their parents or family members.

Rink Link is supported by a three-year grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education. The project is part of the Department’s efforts to improve all aspects of the lives of people with disabilities.

Smith says that ice arenas that are open to everyone are places for people with disabilities to have fun, participate in healthy activities, meet other people, and even find a job.

Alpha One’s commitment to Rink Link is strong. Alpha One has joined ISI and the North East Ice Skating Managers Association and looks forward to meeting other members at conferences and at ice arenas.

For more information on Rink Link call 1-800-300-6016.